



**The Ohio Department of Veteran Services  
Testimony of Director Deborah Ashenhurst  
Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee  
April 29, 2025**

Chairwoman Manchester, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Weinstein and Members of the Government Oversight and Reform Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to detail the Department of Veterans Services' FY 2026-27 Biennial Budget request and our related services and strategies.

I am Debbie Ashenhurst, and I had the honor of serving our country for 37 years, retiring as a Major General in the U.S. Army in 2015. Today, I'm proud to continue that service as Governor DeWine's Director of Veterans Services, working to support and empower Ohio's veteran community.

While we continually seek to expand our reach and impact, one thing remains unchanged — our unwavering mission to serve as the Trusted Voice for Veterans. Through advocacy, collaboration, and strategic partnerships, we are dedicated to ensuring Ohio's veterans have access to the opportunities and resources they have rightfully earned.

You are all familiar with the many ways our department works to enhance the lives of veterans. Thanks to your strong support, we are ensuring veterans can access the education and job training opportunities they deserve at Ohio's many institutions of higher education, apprenticeship programs, and on-the-job training programs through the State Approving Agency. Also, with your support our workforce teams have helped businesses across Ohio recruit, hire, retain, and elevate veterans — integrating their leadership, discipline, and expertise into every sector of our economy. Our Workforce Team's mission recently expanded, with help from JobsOhio, to traveling to large military installations and actively recruiting members of the military who are separating from service to come to Ohio to start their next career. While this is a new project, early signs are promising in our efforts to grow Ohio's veteran workforce.

With this budget, our department will continue to execute our legal duty to train and certify nearly 750 county veteran service officers and employees in all 88 counties. These county employees are at the front lines of serving our state's veterans in their time of need and help draw down billions of dollars in federal funds every year.

Every day, as you enter the Riffe building, you pass the Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame. It's a powerful reminder of those who, even after hanging up their uniforms, continue to serve our

communities and state in extraordinary ways. This budget builds upon these core initiatives, reinforcing our commitment to Ohio's veterans over the next biennium.

I deeply appreciate Governor DeWine's leadership and the legislature's steadfast support in advancing these critical efforts. While many aspects of our mission remain consistent, their impact is profound. Clearly, the education, workforce, county training, and outreach portion of our budget is vital, but almost 90% of our budget is dedicated to the operation of our Ohio Veterans Homes in Sandusky and Georgetown.

The Ohio Veterans Homes are long-term care facilities that care for Ohio's heroes as they enjoy their final years with us. OVH-Sandusky is a massive healthcare facility that was built in 1888. This 99-acre campus provides services ranging from independent living for veterans who do not require round-the-clock care, to our memory care units, where we care for those with Alzheimer's and other dementia related conditions, and everything in between. In total, the Sandusky campus has more than 600 beds for our wartime veterans to call home. OVH-Georgetown is still one of the larger facilities in the state at 168 beds and was built in 2000. Although brand-new compared to our Sandusky facility, this home still needs constant attention and upkeep to provide the best service possible to our veterans. Operating these two Homes, which are funded in conjunction with federal VA dollars, accounts for most of our budget request.

I'd like to provide a quick update on where our department is at following last year's historic investment in the Ohio Veterans Homes. Thanks to the support of the General Assembly, we successfully allocated \$65 million to modernize our two state-run Veteran Homes. Due to the age of these facilities and the long gap in sizeable investment, these healthcare facilities were in desperate need of updates to provide 21<sup>st</sup>-century care for our veterans. These state funds played a critical role in securing a \$118 million grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, bringing the total project budget to approximately \$183 million.

In partnership with the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission, we have been aggressively pushing forward on this important mission. To qualify for federal funding, our projects must meet stringent standards regarding quality, square footage, and facility capabilities. We have ensured compliance with these standards while strategically utilizing state funds to initiate the process.

In early 2024, we engaged architectural firms for both projects and began preliminary design work. These initial designs were submitted over the summer, and since then, we have made significant progress in design development, which is now nearing completion. We anticipate finalizing the plans in the coming months.

In October 2024, we received full federal approval for our projects. However, we were informed that the available federal appropriation was insufficient to cover the costs for the current fiscal year. In response, we have continued advancing the design process and begun essential site work in preparation for full-scale construction once federal funds are released.

- **Sandusky Campus:** Current efforts focus on site preparation and utility infrastructure to support the upcoming construction phase.
- **Georgetown Campus:** In addition to site work, we aim to initiate some structural components of the project ahead of the major construction phase.

The primary objective of this modernization effort is to transition both skilled nursing facilities to single-occupancy rooms. This upgrade will significantly enhance the quality of care for our veteran residents by providing a more supportive living environment and improving infection control measures.

- **Sandusky:** Construction of a new 128-bed facility on the existing campus.
- **Georgetown:** A reconfiguration of the facility's core, along with the addition of two new wings, creating 88 new rooms.

State funds have been instrumental in allowing us to maintain momentum, ensuring we are fully prepared to move into major construction once federal appropriations are secured. This investment represents a critical step forward in honoring our commitment to Ohio's veterans by providing them with the high-quality care and accommodations they deserve.

We will continue our core mission at the Ohio Veterans Homes and to continue to grow Ohio's veteran workforce. We look back proudly on our accomplishments that show record-low veteran unemployment, high recruitment numbers from our workforce team, and a successful closeout of the Ohio Veterans Bonus program, which ended last budget cycle. We are proud of the work we do every day for Ohio's veterans and their families and look forward to another two years of service to our state's heroes.

On behalf of Ohio's veterans and their families, I sincerely appreciate your continued support. I welcome any questions you may have.